

Candidates, and two very contrasting messages, set to clash in first debate

By Patrick Healy and Alexander Burns, New York Times News Service September 25, 2016



Technicians set up the stage Sunday for the presidential debate at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York.
—Julio Cortez / AP

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are spoiling for an extraordinary clash over race and gender that could come as early as Monday's [debate](#), with both presidential candidates increasingly staking their fortunes on the cultural issues that are convulsing the nation.

Clinton helped pressure the police in Charlotte, North Carolina, to [release video footage](#) Saturday of an officer's shooting of a black man. She expressed concern that too many African-Americans feel that their lives are disposable. And she has

repeatedly denounced Trump for making racist and sexist statements, recently releasing a commercial that shows Trump describing a woman as “a slob” and another as “flat-chested.”

Trump last week emphatically endorsed “[stop-and-frisk](#),” a contentious policing tactic that is loathsome to many African-Americans. His political pitch to black voters, as he put it at a rally on Saturday in Roanoke, Virginia, is, “What do you have to lose?” At the same event, Trump also mangled the name of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture, and bragged about his respect for women, just hours after [threatening to invite](#) Gennifer Flowers, who accused Bill Clinton of having an adulterous relationship with her, to the debate.

In a campaign that has veered from traditional policy arguments toward a battle over national identity and values, Clinton and Trump are more sharply opposed over racial and gender issues than any two presidential opponents in decades. Rather than play it safe with milquetoast positions, Clinton wants to increase turnout among African-Americans and women by tackling issues of bias and respect. Trump is positioning himself at the vanguard of white men.

“The extremity of the divergence is unlike anything I have confronted in my adult life,” said [Randall L. Kennedy](#), a professor of law at Harvard whose books include “The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency.” “The analogies that come to mind are Goldwater versus Johnson in 1964, and Lincoln versus Douglas in 1860.”

Both candidates are preparing for race and gender to come up during Monday’s debate, which has three advertised themes, including one called “America’s direction.”

Many Democrats believe Clinton has an edge: Her party is energized around these issues and seems eager for a fight, while some Republicans sound fatigued about racism in law enforcement.

“Race and gender are often ignored, often belittled with ridiculous sound bites,” said [Donna Brazile](#), chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee. “Having the two of them debate race and gender issues would show more clearly than anything else that one candidate has a record and vision to bring people

together, and one has offered the most divisive, bigoted and sexist comments and policies we've seen from a major party nominee."

Yet Republicans see electoral advantages for Trump. He won the nomination largely by appealing to the resentments of whites, especially working-class voters who say they are tired of debating racism and appreciate Trump's message of law and order. He is also emphasizing security at a time of unpredictable violence in American cities, such as Friday's fatal shooting of five people at a mall near Seattle.

[Newt Gingrich](#), the former House speaker, said Trump, whom he has advised, has an opening to present himself as a stern leader and an agent of change for minorities. Clinton, Gingrich said, was vulnerable to being tagged as part of what he called a "wing of American intellectual culture" defined by the concept that the "police are dangerous, and if only we didn't have any guns, nobody would get hurt wing of American intellectual culture."

But Gingrich also encouraged Trump to acknowledge directly that blacks faced "a steeper hill to climb."

"I'm hoping he'll do more of it," Gingrich said, "and communicate that being black in America is different and is harder, that the legacy of slavery and discrimination is real."

Even in other times of social unrest, few if any presidential candidates have constructed their political arguments around themes of race, gender and cultural diversity as much as Clinton and Trump. And their message has only intensified before the first debate, which looms as a showdown for a wide spectrum of voters — minorities and women and more educated voters on one side, white men and working-class voters on the other.

Clinton, who holds a slim lead in national poll averages, has responded to the violence of the past week by casting herself again as a champion of diversity and inclusion. She spoke out quickly after the [fatal police shooting](#) of a black man in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to denounce "systemic racism" against blacks. And after the recent bombings in New York and New Jersey, she rushed to make the case that Trump had endangered the country with his oratorical attacks on Muslims.

She also gave a speech last week criticizing Trump for having shown disrespect to people with disabilities. Her new commercial about Trump and women ends with a powerful question: "Is this the president we want for our daughters?"

Mark Mellman, who advised John Kerry's campaign in 2004, said Clinton's challenge Monday will be to channel the frustrations of minority voters, while reassuring whites who are sympathetic on racial issues. "You have to understand the problem, empathize with the problem, talk about how to solve the problem," he said, "without appearing to condone the violent response to it."

Trump has hardened his own arguments recently, and dialed up his warnings against excessive social tolerance. He speculated last week that political correctness may have held back authorities from stopping the attacks in New York and New Jersey, and he asserted that admitting more refugees from Syria would harm the American "quality of life."

After the police shootings in Tulsa and Charlotte, Trump's running mate, Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana, complained that there was "too much of this talk of institutional bias or racism in law enforcement."

Pence and several Republican lawmakers have drawn criticism for such remarks on race, including a congressman from North Carolina, Robert Pittenger, who [said that protesters](#) in Charlotte "hate white people because white people are successful and they're not." Pittenger later apologized.

Facing polls that show most voters see him as intolerant of minorities and women, Trump has sought to reassure voters that he could also be an inclusive president. He has visited black communities a few times, and at the rally in Roanoke on Saturday, Trump called the new African-American museum in Washington "a beautiful place" and vowed to support black Americans as president.

But he did botch the museum's name, calling it the "Smithsonian Museum of American History, African-American Art."

Trump also boasted of having employed women in influential jobs. But he risked alienating some women voters over the weekend by threatening to provide a

front-row seat at the debate to Flowers as retaliation to remarks by Mark Cuban, the billionaire who has been a vocal Trump critic.

[Celinda Lake](#), a Democratic pollster, said Clinton's focus on "bringing people together" would resonate with women voters, many of whom are troubled by the recent police shootings.

"Hillary Clinton has a real chance to get these independent women out of the undecided column with her messages about race and gender rather than Trump's divisive views," Lake said.

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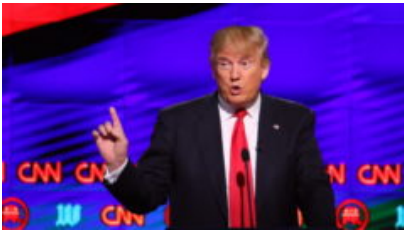
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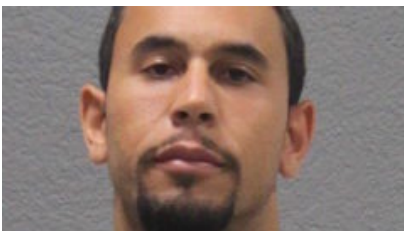
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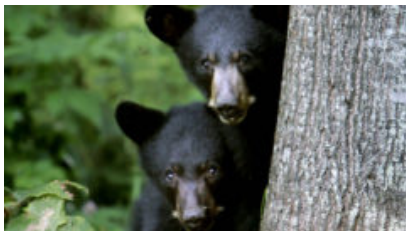
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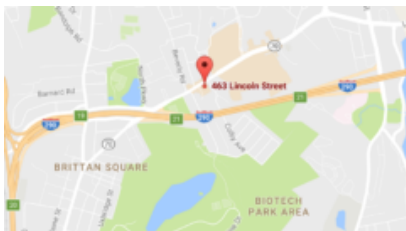
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